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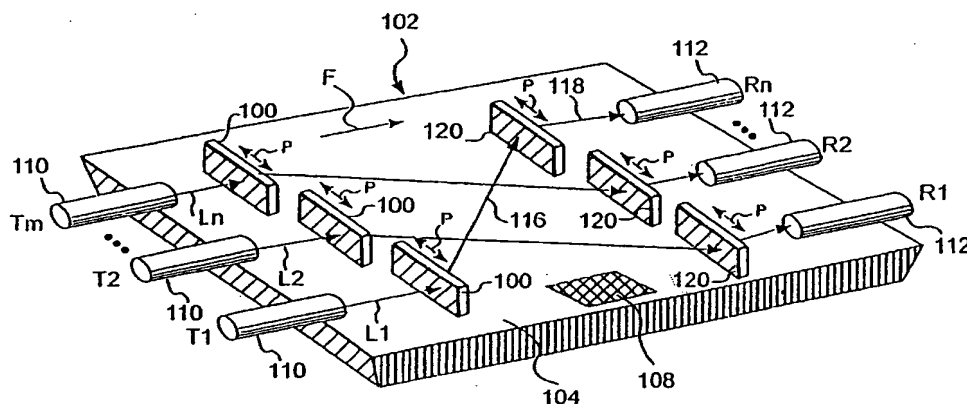
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(54) Title: OPTICAL SWITCH



(57) Abstract: An optical switch (102) guides data transmitting light beams (L1-Ln) along free space switching paths (116, 118) from one or more input optical fibers (110) to one or more output optical fibers (112). The optical switch (102) includes a microchip base member (104), diffractive, refractive or reflective optical elements (103) positioned on carrier panels (105), and actuators (101) for moving the carrier panels (105). The optical elements (103) are positionable by the actuators (101) to guide light beams (L1-Ln) emitted by the input optical fibers (110) in free space to the receiving output optical fibers (112). The actuators may be linear (101) and/or rotary (201). Switching of light beams (L1-Ln) can be from one input port to one or many output ports, and vice versa, to form a free space optical cross-connect switch and router.

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OPTICAL SWITCH

BACKGROUND

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to switching devices. More particularly, the present invention relates to an optical switch for selectively redirecting one or more
5 beams of data transmitting light carried by one or more light transmitting input conduits to one or more light transmitting output conduits.

2. Background of the Invention

Today's high speed communications systems commonly employ fiber optic communications channels with electronic switches and routers. However, the
10 combination of optical data transmission and electronic switching requires numerous optical-to-electrical-to-optical conversions. This is costly in terms of bandwidth limitations, power consumption, size of system components, and overall system throughput.

At the core of today's network is the switching fabric. A major function of the
15 switch is to reroute optical signals from an array of input fibers to an array of output fibers. Switches currently in use require conversion of the optical signals received on fiber channels into electrical signals, electrically routing these signals, and then converting them back into optical signals and launching them into the fiber channels. This complex set of conversions creates significant overhead in terms of power, data
20 throughput, and latency. Such switches are blocking (i.e., disallow signal fan-out and fan-in) and are non-transparent (i.e., the signal does not stay in optical form). Also the bandwidth (data rate) of the signal must be within that of the electronic switch, which can be orders of magnitude less than that of the optical signal. Thus, the router becomes the system's bottleneck.

25 What is needed, therefore, is an improved optical switching device that avoids bandwidth and other limitations present in electro-optical switches.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention eliminates the difficulties and disadvantages of the prior art by providing an optical cross connect switch that is capable of optically transferring optical beams propagating in an input optical fiber to one or several output optical fibers. The optical cross connect switch can be designed such that it distributes the optical signal propagating in either one or several input optical fibers to either one or many output optical fibers in any predetermined combination. Additionally, the optical cross connect switch of the present invention can be programmed for any specific optical connections that are to be formed between input and output optical fibers.

The optical cross connection switch of the present invention can be used in the switching fabrics of fiber optic networks. The optical cross connect switch removes the bottleneck of converting light signals into electrical signals and back into optical signals. Additionally, the present invention can be used in switching and routing circuits for many different types of fiber optic networks.

Additionally, the optical cross connect switch of the present invention may use microelectromechanical systems (MEMS), diffractive, reflective and refractive optical elements and fibers. The use of MEMS devices can allow the optical cross connection switch of the present invention to be made compact in size, can decrease the power consumption needed to switch the optical signals, and switch the optical signal at a relatively high speed. Further, the use of diffractive optical elements provides the capability of switching the optical signal in a flexible way. Further, the diffractive optical elements may minimize signal loss caused by coupling. Also, because the present invention uses optical rather than electrical switching, the switching time is typically less dependent on the size of the network (i.e., the number of input and output fibers).

This invention introduces a new approach to implement a transparent all-optical, non-blocking crossconnect switch for routing optical network traffic. This approach is based on the combination of MEMS, diffractive optical elements, and optical fibers. The current invention can be used in the switching fabrics of fiber optic

telecommunication as well as computer networks. It can remove the bottlenecks of converting between optical and electrical signals and the bandwidth limitations of current electro-optic switches. Additionally, the present invention can be used in switching and routing circuits for many types of fiber optic networks since it is protocol
5 independent. It is not limited to today's Synchronous Optical NETWORK (SONET) and Synchronous Digital Hierarchy (SDH) data streams, but can also just as easily carry protocols such as Asynchronous Transfer Mode (ATM), Internet Protocol (IP), and Gigabit Ethernet. Compared to mirror-based MEMS switch approaches, the proposed switch needs far fewer actuators, which enhances size, yield, cost, and power
10 consumption. Also, it has improved optical coupling efficiencies. In addition, the present invention may offer significant reconfiguration speed and routing flexibility advantages.

The present invention is implemented using several exemplary embodiments each of which uses diffractive, refractive or reflective optical elements to route the light
15 signals from the input to the output fibers. Diffractive optical elements (DOE) provide a better alternative to mirror based routers because of their high diffraction efficiencies (which can result in very low coupling losses) and functional flexibility in combining multiple optical functions in a single DOE element. This eliminates the need for GRIN or ball lenses and also allows routing the optical beam from a single input fiber to
20 multiple output fibers simultaneously.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Preferred embodiments of the invention will now be described in further detail. Other features, aspects, and advantages of the present invention will become better understood with regard to the following detailed description, appended claims, and
25 accompanying drawings (which are not to scale) where:

FIG. 1 is a diagrammatic view of an optical switch using linear translation optical switching elements according to the invention;

FIG. 2 is a perspective view of a linear translation optical switching element shown in FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a side view of the optical switching element of FIG. 2;

FIG. 4 is a top view of a linear translation sliding actuator for carrying an optical switching element according to the invention;

FIG. 5 is a front-view of a switching panel with diffractive optical elements according to the invention;

FIG. 6 is a diagrammatic view of an alternate embodiment of an optical switch using rotationally positioned optical switching elements according to the invention;

FIG. 7 is a perspective view of a rotational optical switching element shown in FIG. 6;

FIG. 8 is a front-view of a switching panel of the optical switching element of FIG. 6 with partially reflective optical elements according to the invention;

FIG. 9 is a diagrammatic view of a further embodiment of an optical switch using rotationally positioned reflective optical switching elements according to the invention;

FIG. 10 is a perspective view of a rotational optical switching element shown in FIG. 9; and

FIG. 11 is a front view of the optical switching element shown in FIG. 10.

Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiment(s)

With reference now to the drawings in which like reference characters designate like or similar parts throughout the several views, a first embodiment of an optical switch **102** according to the invention is shown in FIG. 1. The optical switch **102** is formed on a base **104**, which in a preferred embodiment is a microchip or semiconductor substrate. The optical switch **102** is used to redirect or switch one or

more data transmitting input light beams **L1-Ln**, which are traveling in free-space along the direction generally indicated by arrow **F**, exiting from one or more light transmitting input optical fibers **110 (T1-Tm)** to one or more target devices, such as one or more light transmitting output optical fibers **112 (R1-Rn)**. The optical switch **102**
5 includes one or more input ports for receiving one or more input optical fibers **110**, and one or more output ports are provided to receive one or more output optical fibers **112**. An electronic controller **108**, preferably integrated into the base **104**, controls operation of the optical switch **102**.

It will be appreciated that the number of input optical fibers **110** connected to the
10 optical switch **102** may be the same as or different than the number of output optical fibers **112**. As each input light beam **L1-Ln** exits an input optical fiber **110**, the light beam **L1-Ln** enters free space before encountering an input optical switching element **100**. The input optical switching element **100** redirects the light beam **L1-Ln** to an appropriate output optical switching element **120** which in turn redirects the light beam
15 onto an output optical fiber **112**. The optical switching elements **100** and **120** are positioned to redirect the light beams **L1-Ln** by actuators that move along the direction indicated by arrow **P**.

Shown in FIG. 2 is a perspective view of an input optical switching element **100**, it being understood that each output optical switching element **120** is highly similar in
20 configuration and function. Each switching element **100** is attached to the base **104** and includes a carrier panel **105**, one or more diffractive (may also be refractive) optical elements **103** attached to the carrier panel **105**, and an actuator **101** controlled by controller **108**. The base **104**, the carrier panel **105** and the actuator **101** are made from a stiff resilient material, such as silicon-based materials commonly used in
25 micromachining fabrications. The optical elements **103** are preferably fabricated from glass (such as poly-silicon or silicon dioxide) using a micromachining process or using post processes commonly employed for micro-optics fabrications.

In a preferred embodiment, the number of optical elements **103** attached to the carrier panel **105** of the input optical switching elements **100** is equal to the number of output optical fibers **112** so that each beam **L1-Ln** can be routed to any one of the output optical fibers **112** by placing the proper optical element in the path of the optical beam to be redirected. Likewise, the number of optical elements **103** attached to the carrier panel **105** of the output optical switching elements **120** is equal to the number of input optical fibers **110** so that each output optical fiber **112** can receive any one of the beams **L1-Ln**.

Preferably, the carrier panel **105** is pivotally connected to the actuator **101** by one or more hinges **107**. The hinges **107** enable the carrier panel **105** to be positioned vertically on the actuator **101**. In FIG. 3, a side-view of the carrier panel **105** and a hinge **107** is shown. The hinge **107** passes through a hole **109** formed in the lower portion of the carrier panel **105**. When the actuator **101** is energized, it moves linearly as generally indicated by arrow **P**.

In FIG. 4, a preferred embodiment of a sliding linear actuator **101** is shown. The actuator **101** is moved electrostatically by the controller **108** based on electrical excitation of a series of opposite polarity poles **113** and **115** using three-phase bipolar square-wave excitation. For purposes of clarifying the switching methodology, the outer poles **113** are alternately labeled **A**, **B** and **C**, and the inner poles **115** are alternately labeled **1** and **2**. Cycling voltage applied to the outer poles **A**, **B** and **C** moves the actuator. To move the actuator to the right, a voltage is first applied to outer pole **A** which in-turn attracts inner pole **2**, then a voltage is applied to outer pole **B** to attract inner pole **1**, then a voltage is applied to outer pole **C**, and so on. Excitation of the poles in this order causes a continuous motion of the actuator to the right. To move the actuator to the left, the excitation should go in the **C-B-A** sequence. The speed of the movement is controlled by the amplitude and frequency of the applied square wave.

In FIG. 5, a carrier panel **105** is shown. The carrier panel **105** is attached to the actuator **101** by the hinges **107** that pass through holes **109**. The carrier panel **105**

holds one or more optical elements 103. The optical elements 103 may be diffractive, refractive, or holographic optical elements. Each optical element 103 is used to direct an input optical beam L1-Ln (FIG. 1) in a desired direction along a switching path to an output optical fiber 112. For example, FIG. 1 illustrates how beam L1 is redirected by an input switching element 100 along path 116 to an output switching element 120, where it is again redirected along path 118 to an output optical fiber Rn.

The optical elements 103 may convert a diverging optical wave into a plane wave that propagates toward the output fiber, and they can also convert a plane wave into a converging optical wave. The optical elements 103 may also be designed to direct the light beam to more than one direction simultaneously. The optical elements 103 are fabricated from a transparent material, such as glass, for the optical wavelengths of interest. The fabrication of the optical elements can be done as part of the micromachining process, or using micro-optic post-processing techniques they can be fabricated separately and then assembled with the rest of the optical switch 102. The cross-connect architecture using microelectronic fabrication techniques allows the fabrication of thousands of devices (including controller 108) on the same wafer, which plays a major role in cost reduction. The number of optical elements 103 in each carrier panel 105 can vary.

A second embodiment of an optical switch 200 using rotary actuation of optical switching elements is shown in FIG. 6. In this embodiment, the optical switch 200 includes one or more input optical switching elements 202 and one or more output optical switching elements 204. The optical switch 200 is formed on a base 214, which in a preferred embodiment is a microchip or semiconductor substrate. The optical switch 200 is used to redirect or switch one or more data transmitting input light beams L1-Ln exiting from one or more light transmitting input optical fibers 210 (T1-Tm) to one or more target devices, such as one or more light transmitting output optical fibers 212 (R1-Rn). The number of input optical fibers 210 connected to the optical switch 200 may be the same as or different than the number of output optical fibers 212. As each input light beam L1-Ln exits an input optical fiber 210, the light beam L1-Ln enters free space before encountering

an input optical switching element 202. The input optical switching element 202 redirects the light beam L1-Ln to an appropriate output optical switching element 204 which in turn redirects the light beam onto an output optical fiber 212. An electronic controller 206, preferably integrated into the base 214, controls operation of the optical switch 200 including positioning of the switching elements 202, 204. The input optical switching elements 202 as well as the output optical switching elements 204 are positioned properly to redirect the optical beams emanating from one or more input fibers by actuators that rotate in quarter turns along the general direction indicated by arrow Q.

An output optical switching element 204 is shown in FIG. 7 and includes a pair of crossed optical device carrier panels 205 positioned on a rotary actuator 201. As shown in FIG. 8, each carrier panel 205 includes one or more diffractive (may also be refractive) optical elements 203. The base 214, the carrier panel 205, and the actuator 201 are made from a stiff resilient material, such as silicon-based materials commonly used in micromachining fabrications. The optical elements 203 are preferably fabricated from glass (such as poly-silicon or silicon dioxide) using a micromachining process or using post processes commonly used for micro-optics fabrications. The actuator 201 is a rotary type, such as that disclosed in M. Mehregany, "Silicon Microactuators," Advances in Actuators, Edited by: A.P. Dorey, et.al., (1995). To redirect an input beam L1-Ln, the rotary actuator 201 is rotated between a quarter to a three-quarter turn to position the proper optical element for redirecting the optical beam.

In FIG. 8, the carrier panel 205 is shown. The carrier panel 205 is attached to the rotary actuator 201. The optical elements 203 may be diffractive, refractive or holographic optical elements. These optical elements 203 are used to redirect an input light beam L1-Lm in a desired direction along a switching path to an output optical fiber 212. Also, these optical elements 203 may convert a diverging optical wave into a plane wave. Likewise, the optical elements 203 may convert a plane wave into a converging optical wave. The optical elements 203 may be designed to redirect the beam in multiple directions simultaneously (i.e., to split the beam). The optical elements 203 are preferably made from a transparent material, such as glass, for the

optical wavelengths of interest. The fabrication of the optical elements 203 can be done as part of the micromachining process, or they can be fabricated separately and then assembled with the rest of the optical switch 200. The number of optical elements 203 in each carrier panel 205 can vary.

5 Another embodiment of a rotary-type optical switch 302 is shown in FIG. 9. In this embodiment, the optical switch 302 includes one or more optical switching elements 300. The optical switch 302 is formed on a base 304, which in a preferred embodiment is a microchip or semiconductor substrate. The optical switch 302 is used to redirect or switch one or more data transmitting input light beams L1-Lm exiting from one or more light
10 transmitting input optical fibers 310 (T1-Tm) to one or more target devices, such as one or more light transmitting output optical fibers 312 (R1-Rm). The number of input optical fibers 310 connected to the optical switch 302 may be the same as or different than the number of output optical fibers 312. As each input light beam L1-Lm exits an input optical fiber 210, the light beam L1-Lm enters free space before encountering an optical
15 lens 340 which narrows or collimates the beam L1-Lm and converts it to a plane wave. The beam impinges on one of the switching elements 300 which redirects the light beam L1-Lm to an appropriate output optical fiber 312. Before entering the output optical fiber 312, the beam L1-Lm is passed through a second lens 342 which converts the beam to a spherical wave for propagation through the output optical fiber 312. An electronic
20 controller 308, preferably integrated into the base 304, controls operation of the optical switch 302 including positioning of the switching elements 300.

As shown in FIG. 10, each optical switching element 300 includes an optical device carrier panels 305 positioned on a rotary actuator 301. As shown in FIG. 11, each carrier panel 305 includes one or more reflective (may also be diffractive) optical elements 303.
25 The rotary actuator 301 (FIG. 10) is provided to enable rotation of the optical elements 303 into and out of the paths of the input light beams L1-Lm. As the light beam passes through an optical element 303, it gets redirected toward the proper output optical fiber 312. The base 304, the carrier panel 305, and the actuator 301 are made from a stiff resilient material, such as silicon-based materials commonly used in micromachining

fabrications. The optical elements 303 are preferably fabricated from glass (such as polysilicon or silicon dioxide) using a micromachining process or using post processes commonly employed for micro-optics fabrications.

5 The actuator 301 is a rotational type, refer to M. Mehregany, "Silicon Microactuators," Advances in Actuators, Edited by: A.P. Dorey, et.al., (1995). To change the direction of a beam L1-Lm, the actuator 301 is rotated about an eighth of a turn. When the carrier panel 305 is in a reflection position, the beam impinging on the appropriate optical element 303 is reflected (or partially reflected) toward an output optical fiber 312. When the carrier panel 305 is in a non-reflection position, the beam passes
10 without reflection and no redirection of the beam will result. This cross-connect switching methodology can be used for broadcast switching applications.

It will be appreciated that an optical switch in accordance with the invention provides advantages over mirror-based optical cross-connect switches. Coupling losses of the present invention are significantly reduced. Diffractive as well as refractive optical
15 elements can have up to 98% coupling efficiencies. Unlike most mirror-based switches, the present invention does not use so-called GRIN lenses which place severe constraints on the alignment of the optical beams. Also, the optical switch of this invention requires no power to maintain its current switching state while most mirror based switches require a continuous supply of power to maintain their switching position, which is a significant
20 disadvantage in the event of a power failure. The speed of the introduced sliding actuator may present a clear advantage for high speed switching applications.

While the invention has been described in detail, it is to be expressly understood that it will be apparent to persons skilled in the relevant art that various changes of form, design or arrangement may be made to the invention without departing from the spirit and scope
25 of the invention. Therefore, the above mentioned description is to be considered exemplary, rather than limiting, and the true scope of the invention is that defined in the following claims.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. An apparatus for switching an optical signal from at least one input optical fiber to at least one output optical fiber, the apparatus comprising:
 - a base;
 - at least one optical element having optical properties for guiding an optical signal
5 in free space along a free space switching path from an input optical fiber to an output optical fiber;
 - an actuator attached to said base for positioning said at least one optical element to guide the at least one optical signal along its free space switching path; and
 - a controller for controlling said actuator to position said at least one optical element
10 along the free space switching path.
2. The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein said actuator includes a rotary actuator for rotatably moving the at least one optical element into the free space switching path.
3. The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein said at least one optical element includes a refractive optical element.
4. The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein said at least one optical element includes a diffractive optical element.
5. The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein said controller is integral with said base.

6. The apparatus of Claim 1, further comprising a carrier panel attached to said actuator, the carrier panel including said at least one optical element and being movable by the actuator to position the at least one optical element in the free space switching path of an optical signal.

7. The apparatus of Claim 1, further comprising an input lens for conditioning the optical signal for travel along its free space switching path.

8. The apparatus of Claim 1, further comprising an output lens for conditioning the optical signal for travel along an output optical fiber.

9. An apparatus for switching an optical signal from at least one input optical fiber to at least one output optical fiber, the apparatus comprising:

a base;

5 at least one input optical element having optical properties for guiding an optical signal in free space along a first portion of a free space switching path from an input optical fiber to an output optical fiber;

an input actuator attached to said base for positioning said at least one input optical element to guide the optical signal along the first portion of the free space switching path;

10 at least one output optical element having optical properties for guiding an optical signal in free space along a second portion of the free space switching path;

an output actuator attached to said base for positioning said at least one output optical element to guide the optical signal along the second portion of the free space switching path; and

15 a controller for controlling said actuators to position the optical elements along the free space switching path.

10. The apparatus of Claim 9, wherein said input actuator includes a linear actuator for linearly moving the at least one input optical element into the first portion of the free space switching path.

11. The apparatus of Claim 9, wherein said input actuator includes a rotary actuator for rotatably moving the at least one input optical element into the first portion of the free space switching path.

12. The apparatus of Claim 9, wherein said output actuator includes a linear actuator for linearly moving the at least one output optical element into the second portion of the free space switching path.

13. The apparatus of Claim 9, wherein said output actuator includes a rotary actuator for rotatably moving the at least one output optical element into the second portion of the free space switching path.

14. The apparatus of Claim 9, wherein said at least one input optical element includes a refractive optical element.

15. The apparatus of Claim 9, wherein said at least one output optical element includes a diffractive optical element.

16. The apparatus of Claim 9, wherein the number of input optical elements is equal to the number of output optical fibers.

17. The apparatus of Claim 9, wherein the number of output optical elements is equal to the number of input optical fibers.

18. The apparatus of Claim 9, further comprising an input carrier panel attached to said input actuator, the input carrier panel including said at least one input optical element and being movable by the input actuator to position the at least one input optical element in the first portion of the free space switching path.

19. The apparatus of Claim 9, further comprising an output carrier panel attached to said output actuator, the output carrier panel including said at least one output optical element and being movable by the output actuator to position the at least one output optical element in the second portion of the free space switching path.

20. The apparatus of Claim 9, wherein said controller is integral with said base.

21. An optical switch comprising:

a base;

a plurality of input ports for receiving a plurality of input optical fibers which conduct data transmitting light beams;

5 a plurality of output ports for receiving a plurality of output optical fibers which conduct data transmitting light beams;

a plurality of input optical elements for each of said plurality of input ports, said plurality of input optical elements having optical properties for guiding a light beam exiting an input optical fiber in free space along a first portion of a free space switching path from
10 the input optical fiber to an output optical fiber;

a plurality of output optical elements for each of said plurality of output ports, said plurality of output optical elements having optical properties for guiding a light beam exiting an input optical element in free space to an output optical fiber along a second portion of the free space switching path;

15 a plurality of input actuators attached to said base, each input actuator being operable to position a plurality of input optical elements to guide a light beam along the first portion of the free space switching path;

 a plurality of output actuators attached to said base, each output actuator being operable to position a plurality of output optical elements to guide a light beam along the
20 second portion of the free space switching path; and

 a controller for controlling said actuators to position the optical elements along the free space switching path.

22. The optical switch of Claim 21, wherein each of said plurality of input and output actuators includes a linear actuator for linearly moving a plurality of optical elements into the free space switching path.

23. The optical switch of Claim 21, wherein each of said plurality of input and output actuators includes a rotary actuator for rotatably moving a plurality of optical elements into the free space switching path.

24. The optical switch of Claim 21, wherein the number of input optical elements movable by an input actuator equals the number of output optical fibers connectable to the optical switch.

25. The optical switch of Claim 21, wherein the number of output optical elements movable by an output actuator equals the number of input optical fibers connectable to the optical switch.

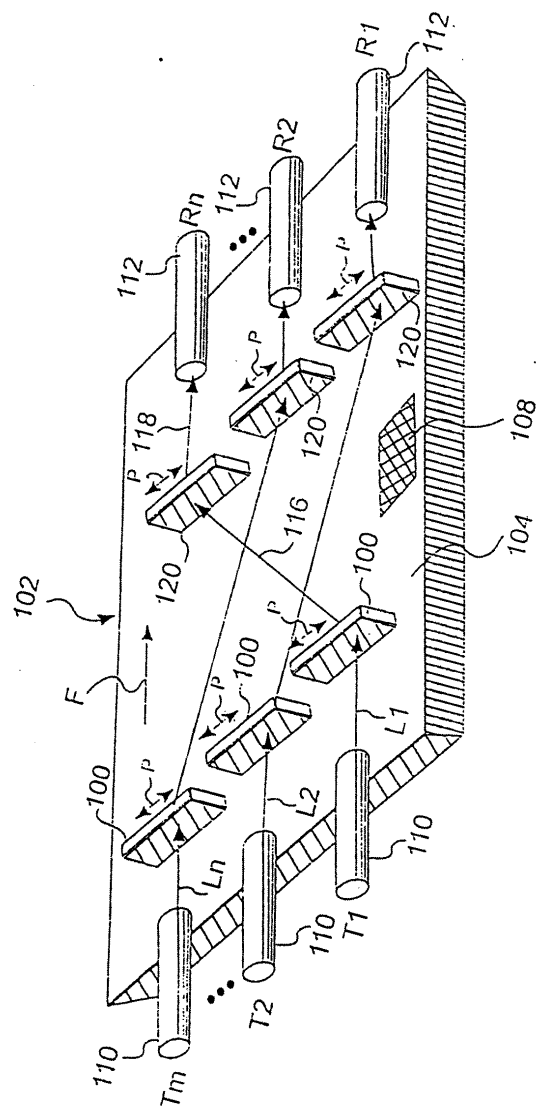


FIG. 1

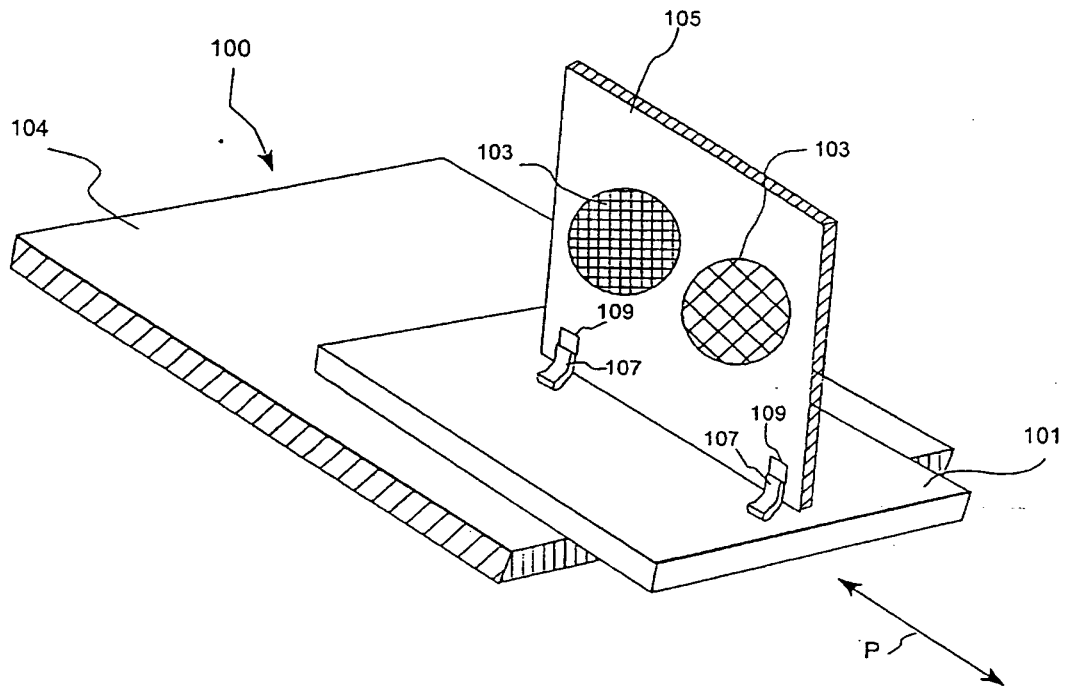


FIG. 2

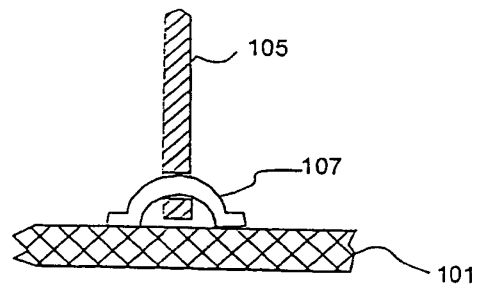


FIG. 3

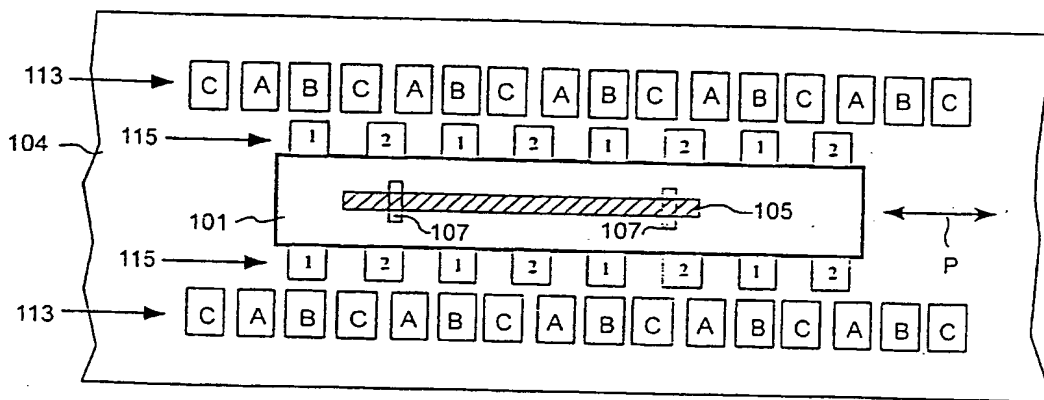


FIG. 4

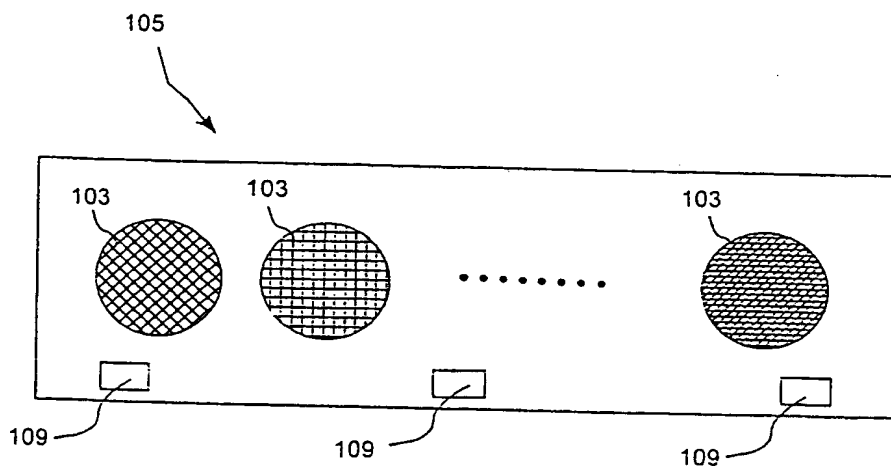


FIG. 5

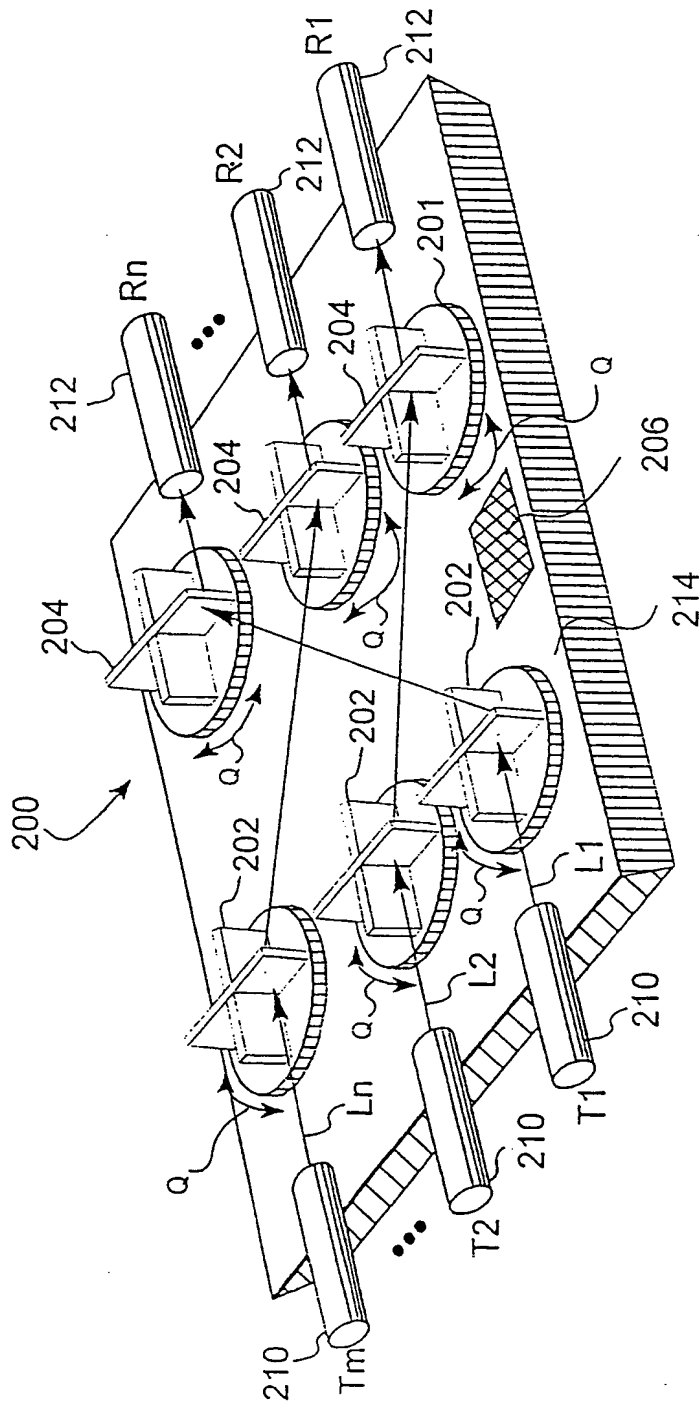


FIG. 6

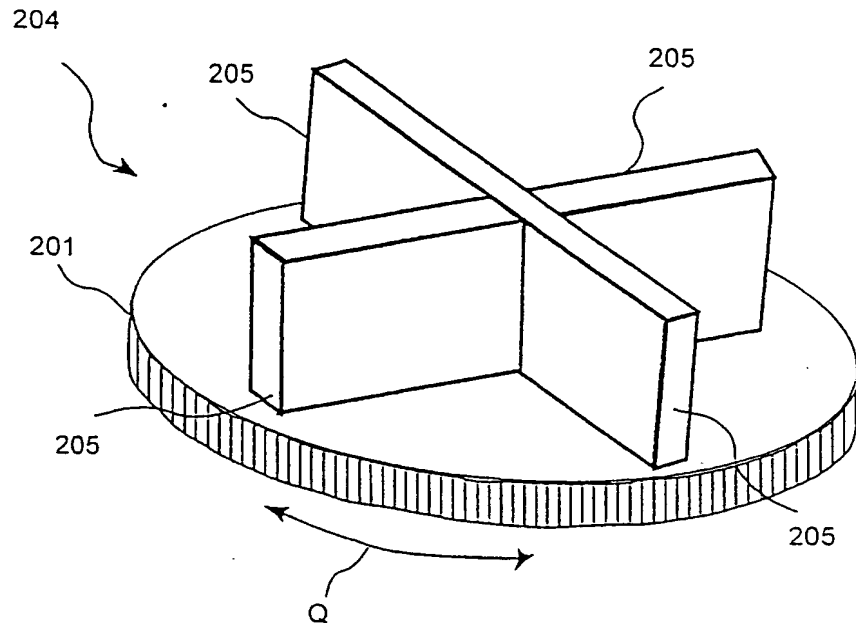


FIG. 7

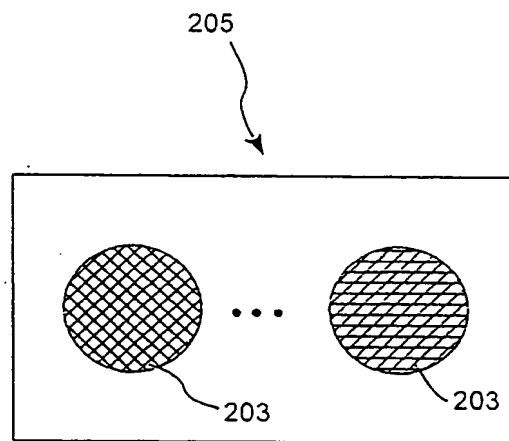


FIG. 8

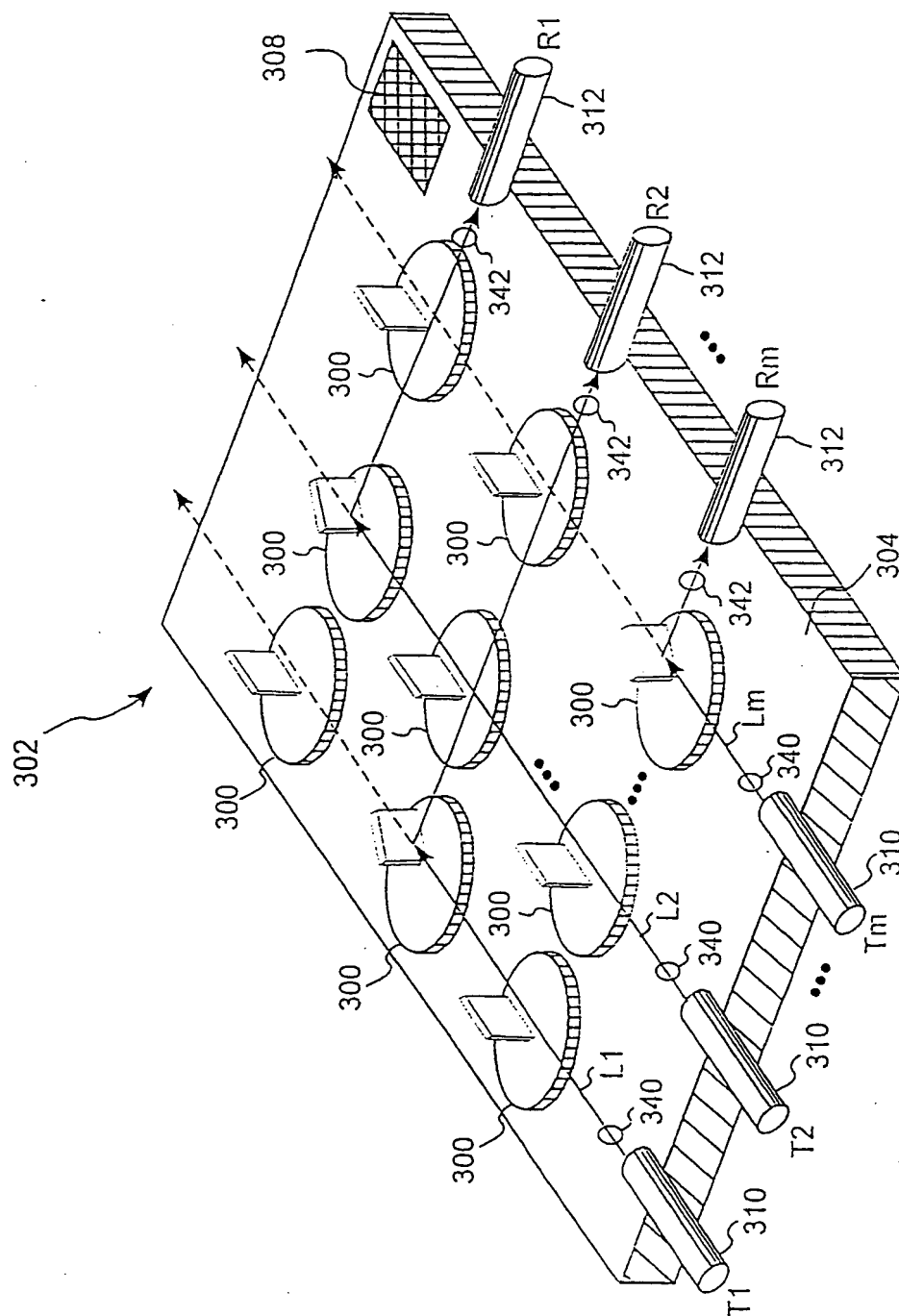


FIG. 9

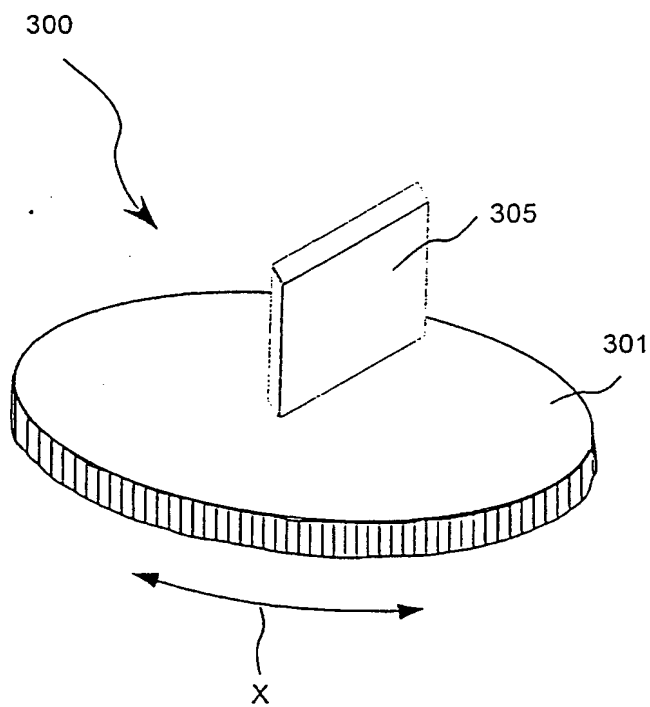


FIG. 10

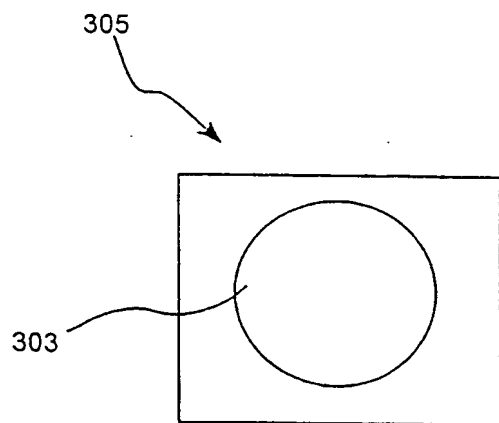


FIG. 11

